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An Afghan Secret Revealed Brings End of an Era

By Carlotta Gall, January 31, 2009

KHOJA GHAR, Afghanistan — Ordered to bury 16 bodies in the dead of night in 1978, a wary young army officer did his best to remember the location, quietly counting the paces from the unmarked mass grave to the roadside.

He gathered from his fellow soldiers that they had just buried Afghanistan's first president, Sardar Mohammad Daoud Khan, and his family. His assassination, during a Communist coup in those tumultuous days, precipitated three decades of war in Afghanistan, a succession of conflicts that are still not spent and that have since touched every Afghan family.

It took 30 years and the relative stability and freedom under President Hamid Karzai for the former officer, Pacha Mir, to reveal his secret. With his help and that of another witness, the government has at long last identified the remains of the former president and his family and announced preparations to reinter the bodies with a state funeral in coming weeks.

Mr. Daoud was the founder of the Republic of Afghanistan and a towering figure in the development of the modern state. He overthrew his own cousin, the last king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, in a coup in 1973, but it was his own assassination five years later that plunged the country into bloodshed and turmoil.

"If you ask any Afghan when did it all start, they will say it is because of that, the assassination of Mr. Daoud, this was the turning point," said Nadir Naeem, 43, a member of Afghanistan's royal family and a grandson of Mr. Daoud. "The last day that Afghanistan was independent was 27th April, 1978."

Eighteen members of the Daoud family were killed that night in the presidential palace, along with a number of officers and aides. They were buried under cover of darkness outside the city. But virtually no one knew quite where.

The victims included the president's wife and her sister; his brother, Naim Khan; his three sons; three daughters; a son-in-law and a daughter-in-law; and four grandchildren, one of whom was only 18 months old.

The popular account of the massacre, which Mr. Naeem retold, was that the family was slain between 4 a.m. and 5 a.m. on April 28, 1978. After a day of fierce fighting, an army captain named Emamuddin entered the palace with a unit of men to arrest Mr. Daoud. The president

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refused to go with him and fired a pistol at the men. The mutinous soldiers responded with a withering hail of gunfire.

Immediately, the president's assassination unleashed 20 months of bloodletting by the Communists, leading to the Soviet Union's invasion in December 1979 and its 10-year occupation of Afghanistan, which left hundreds of thousands of Afghans missing or massacred.

Many victims were buried in unmarked graves on or near a military firing range at Pul-i-Charkhi, an area on the eastern side of the capital, Kabul. That is where government investigators began searching last summer, with the help of two old witnesses.

One was Pacha Mir, who as a young lieutenant in command of a maintenance unit was ordered that night to bury a truckload of bodies near his base at Pul-i-Charkhi.

A retired general today, he recalled in an interview that he and his fellow officers laid the bodies in a tank trench. He then climbed in among the dead to turn their faces toward Mecca, in the Muslim tradition, he said.

"I could not recognize them but I knew they were Daoud Khan's family," he said. He remembered one of the drivers saying to him that he had long served the first family. One of the coup leaders, Maj. Aslam Watanjar, was there at the burial, he said.

When told to shovel earth onto the bodies, Mr. Mir first took a tarpaulin from the truck and laid it over the bodies. Then as he left, he counted 90 paces to the road in an effort to remember the gravesite. The next night his sergeant was ordered to bury 13 more bodies in another grave nearby.

Soon after, Mr. Mir fled the capital and joined the anti-Communist resistance in the mountains. It was only years later that he approached the Daoud family and told his story.

A local farmer, Mawla Gul, 16 at the time, also learned the secret when he came upon soldiers camped on his family's land in the days after the Communist coup. He told his mother. She urged him to mark the grave with stones and to plant a martyr's flag there, which he did some three months later, after the soldiers had left.

His action was enough to bring a government search party to his house. The teenager then fled to the mountains to join the mujahedeen. His family fled to Pakistan.

Mr. Gul kept the secret until he met the government commission searching the area near his village, Khoja Ghar, six months ago. Then he led them to the spot.

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Sardar Mahmood Ghazi, another grandson of Mr. Daoud, was there when the digging began. He called Mr. Mir to travel up from his home in Khost to help. The general provided the last clue.

“We were all standing on the top of a hill, and he just said, ‘This is the place.’ ” Mr. Mir pointed to a patch of ground and two days later the searchers found them, Mr. Ghazi said.

It took months to identify the remains. After so many years in the earth, the canvas that Mr. Mir recalled covering the bodies with had rotted away, leaving only the rings of the tarpaulin, said Dr. Faizullah Kakar, the deputy minister of health, who led the investigation.

Most clothing had disintegrated, too. Members of the family recognized the president’s sister, Ayesha, by an orthopedic boot. The president’s son Omar was identified by the clips of the suspenders he used to wear, Dr. Kakar said.

Eventually, Mr. Daoud was identified by dental molds and by a tiny golden Koran that he carried pinned on his inside breast pocket, he said.

One of the president’s aides, Gen. Anwar Shah Khan, said the Koran had belonged to Mr. Daoud and had been given to him by the king of Saudi Arabia, Dr. Kakar said.

The commission even interviewed the president’s servant, Ghulam Darwish, who used to wash Mr. Daoud’s clothes. Mr. Darwish confirmed that the president had carried the Koran inside his jacket.

From the remains, investigators divined that the president had been hit by a spray of bullets, Dr. Kakar said. There were also two bullet holes in what remained of his son Omar’s shirt, he said.

Two more relatives, Mr. Daoud’s sister-in-law and a granddaughter, who were shot the day of the coup and died later in a hospital, remain missing. The rest of the family was imprisoned and then exiled. They returned to Afghanistan only after the fall of the Taliban in 2001.

Mr. Daoud’s funeral now will not only close one of the bloodiest chapters in Afghan history, but also may bring some peace to his surviving relatives, some of whom were wounded in the shootings 30 years ago.

Mr. Ghazi and Mr. Naeem, the grandsons, said they hoped that a new burial might also open the way for a process of national reconciliation or even a truth commission to address the many war crimes committed under every Afghan government since 1978.

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“We have not come back for revenge,” said Mr. Ghazi, whose father, Mohammed Nizam, a son-in-law of the president and a Foreign Ministry official, was killed along with his grandfather. “The truth has to be discovered and put at the disposal of the Afghan people.”

For the family, the discovery has come as a relief.

“As Muslims,” Mr. Ghazi said, “we have to have a grave and somewhere to pray. If we can have that then we can rest.”